

Opening Statement of the Honorable Ed Whitfield
Subcommittees on Environment the Economy & Energy and Power
Hearing on “The Nuclear Regulatory Commission: Policy and Governance Challenges”
February 28, 2013

(As Prepared for Delivery)

In our last hearing with the Commission, I expressed my optimism and hope that Chairman Macfarlane would restore collegiality to the Commission. She appears to be doing a better job than her predecessor and I think we are all very grateful for that.

When you folks were here last summer, I urged all of you to remember that the costs of regulatory changes are ultimately born by consumers who are struggling to fill their gas tanks and pay their bills. This concern is now joined by a concern for those who will lose their jobs at plants that may close prematurely.

I stated my firm belief that we need to ensure that any additional regulatory costs are justified by real safety benefits. Those concerns are just as valid today, especially given that the Commission is considering a recommendation from the staff that is not cost-justified, as Chairman Shimkus just mentioned.

Last summer, I also referenced a cautionary comment from the NRC Near-term Task Force report regarding lessons learned from the Three Mile Island accident: “...some of the actions taken by the NRC after Three Mile Island were not subjected to a structured review and were subsequently not found to be of substantial safety benefit and were removed.”

I am concerned that the NRC’s consideration of post-Fukushima issues is not as structured and integrated as it should be. I’d like to call your attention to four items which appear to be inter-related but which the Commission is considering individually, independent of the others:

- The Near-term Task Force Recommendation #1 concerning the defense-in-depth philosophy which Chairman Shimkus mentioned;
- The severe accident management order the Commission issued a year ago;
- The filtered vents proposal about which we wrote to you; and
- The Economic Consequences proposal regarding the potential for land contamination.

Clearly, the recommendation to mandate filtered vents is propelled by concerns about land contamination that might result from a severe accident. In fact, in the Commission’s January meeting on filtered vents, there were 43 statements about how the filtered vents issue is linked to the other items I just mentioned. The transcript for the Commission’s meeting on Economic Consequences last September tells a similar story: 49 statements on how it is linked to these other issues. Altogether, we reviewed transcripts from four Commission meetings since August on these topics and found 145 references indicating how these issues are linked.

I simply don’t understand why, with these issues so intertwined, that the Commission would consider each one separately, in such an unstructured process. The Commission’s 2011 decision to prioritize its work into three tiers was a good start. But time has passed and there is a great deal more information that has surfaced since then. It seems like a more integrated approach to post-Fukushima issues is long overdue. So I hope we get some clear explanations this morning.

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